

02/07/2021 – Jan Huber

Sermon

If you keep up with the news through the newspaper or through other media, I'm pretty sure you have run across the term "identity politics". It is usually used with negative connotations. This is because a political leader engaging in "identity politics" is not agitating for policies that he regards as beneficial for his country. No; identity politics is politics that is aimed primarily not for or against any policies whatsoever, but it is aimed at groups. A typical identity politician is primarily identified with a particular ethnic, religious or cultural group, whose interests he is claiming to defend against other groups.

The great problem, of course, with identity politics, is that it very easily degenerates into a zero-sum game. What one group gains is taken from another group. We win, you lose, and nobody notices that in the process, we all lose.

When you consider the Hebrew Bible – the Old Testament in our bible – from a political point of view, however, setting aside for the moment its religious and moral teachings, it is clear that what we now call "identity politics" is at the heart of much of the Old Testament. One of the main concerns is the constant fear that the People Israel will lose its identity as the people of God (Jahweh) when they go "whoring" – that is what the Bible calls it – after other gods. And in case of the promised land, the consequences of this basic policy are worked out with horrifying rigor. In Deuteronomy, the Israelites are told that, when they conquer the promised land, they must devote the people living there "to complete destruction." In Chapter 20 the Lord commands the people to "save alive nothing that breathes" in the cities they capture.

Theologians have worried about this point for centuries. How can these commands be reconciled with the nature of a God who already in Genesis promises Abraham that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"?

The only way I can make sense of this is to consider that in the Old Testament we are not presented with a static description of God, but rather with a growing and developing understanding of who God is; from a tribal deity, who is only concerned about his own people, as he is first portrayed, to a truly universal God, who is concerned about the whole earth, indeed the whole cosmos, and all people in it.

Still, the identity of the people Israel and all the customs and rules that belonged to this were defended with the utmost fanaticism. The clearest example may be the story of the seven brothers in the Second Book of Maccabees, who suffered death under horrific torture one by one rather than give in to the demand of the Greek king that they eat pork.

This is a rather long introduction to the passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians that we have heard today. Paul was a Jew, and a proud one. In his letter to the Philippians he boasts of being "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal". It is all the more amazing that a person like that could come to the radically different understanding that he sets out in today's passage.

In verse 11 Paul divides his converts into two clearly distinguishable groups: those who used to be Gentiles, non-Jews who are called “uncircumcised”, and converted Jews, who were circumcised. The perspective from which he writes is still very much that of a Jew. He tells his followers that before their conversion they were “excluded from citizenship in Israel” – well, at this point a citizen of Ephesus might have asked himself: Why would I want to be a citizen of Israel? But Paul immediately goes on to the corollary – as such they were “*foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.*”

But now their situation has changed completely, not – and that is the main point of his argument of course – because they have joined the people Israel, but because they have accepted Christ, who has destroyed the barrier between the two peoples through his sacrifice. And so now they are “*no longer strangers and aliens, but ... fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God*”.

We can see from Ephesians that the different identities of the Jewish and gentile converts formed an important question for Paul, but after his time it became less important. Paul may have had different dreams, but in the end the Jews were not converted. They remained stubbornly separate. The Christians of course became the dominant force in Western culture, and different ethnic and cultural identities became submerged in one Christian civilization.

Or, to put it in different terms, your Christian identity was about the same as your European identity or your identity as a civilized person. A thousand years ago, you could – and people did – travel from Spain to Norway and, if you were educated, speak the same language – Latin – and participate in the same religious services.

That situation did not last. Christianity spread to non-European civilizations where Christianity can very easily be considered a radically foreign element. The problem of conflicting identities came back again with greater force.

To illustrate this point, I will tell you something about the “rites” controversy in eighteenth century Europe. The rites in question were Chinese practices, and at one time there were furious debates and controversies in Europe about them, which even led to the dissolution and prohibition of the most effective and powerful missionary society ever – the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits.

When the first Jesuits entered China in the 16th century they were confronted with a society and culture that was radically different from their own and yet not necessarily inferior to their own. Accordingly, the Jesuits – who brought with them the most recent advances in European culture and science – decided that their best chance of promoting the Christian religion was to learn as much of Chinese language and culture as they could, so they could meet the Chinese mandarins as equals, and in this they were outstandingly successful. They were prized for their knowledge of astronomy, which was somewhat more advanced than that of their Chinese colleagues, and soon the imperial calendar was actually put together by Jesuits.

They made converts in all classes of society. Recent scholarship estimates the number of their Chinese converts as at least 100,000 at some point in the 17th century. To live and work in Chinese society, however, they had to determine their position

on Chinese customs of all kinds – well, just like their forebears in ancient Roman and Greek society, they could of course not condone the practice of female infanticide; but what about ancestor worship?

This was, and is as far as I know, still is a nearly universal practice among Chinese. I don't think I have ever been in a private Chinese home that didn't have a little altar with rectangular wooden or lacquer tablets with names inscribed on them. These are the names of the deceased fathers, mothers, grandfathers, grandmothers and other deceased ancestors of the people living there. From time to time, especially on certain feast days, people burn an incense stick in front of this altar to pay homage to their ancestors.

To forbid their converts from doing this would have made their position in society impossible, and so the Jesuits, in a fateful decision, decided that this practice was a "civil rite" – like the homage paid to secular rulers for instance, or to national flags – and therefore to be tolerated for Christian converts. This was a decision furiously contested by rival, but less successful missionary societies like the Franciscans and Dominicans, and in the end by the Popes of the times. In the eighteenth century the permission was withdrawn and this was an important factor in the eventual collapse of the Jesuit missionary effort in China. When it started again in the nineteenth century the Western missionaries, now from a position of strength, in a way insisted that their Chinese converts had renounce this part of their heritage if they wanted to become Christians.

What would Saint Paul have thought about this? From my limited experience I think that he would have sided with the Jesuits, but this we will never know.

What I do know is that we must stick with the principle Saint Paul lays out in this letter. The problem of identity will confront us in many ways. Our church, for instance, includes people from very different cultures, who, even if they are devout Christians, have quite different worship practices from ours. I know that to some of our friends from Africa, our worship here seems cold and formal.

But whatever our differences will be, I pray that we adopt Saint Paul's principle, and that our most basic identification will never be that of Dutchmen or heterosexuals or conservatives or – whatever, but that of followers of Christ. We can never go wrong with that.

Amen